

INTERVIEW TIPS

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0636

Know your subject! Know your subject! Know your subject! Reporters are rarely specialists. Even with research, they may know little of daily CAL FIRE operations or firefighting techniques. Make certain the reporter understands the information. Be clear: do not use industry jargon or acronyms without clear definition. If the reporter is confused, the end product suffers.

Tell the whole story. Give reporters all approved information because they may fail to ask about a pertinent piece of information.

Speak for the record. Never tell a reporter anything "off the record" unless you trust that person with your career. Give the media approved official information only. The best way to avoid being quoted as a source for information that you do not want on record is to keep quiet.

Tell the truth. Lies are trouble. If one is caught, the media have two stories instead of one, and the second may become bigger than the first. An admission of error is rarely important news--unless it is preceded by a denial of error. It is better not to discuss a topic than to lie.

Never use the term "no comment". A terse "no comment" sounds defensive and combative. It is better to say: "I can't discuss that," or "I'm not authorized to address that issue, but I'll try to get someone who is," or "We won't know until the investigation is complete."

Don't fake it. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, offer to get the answer as soon as possible, and then follow up.

Never speculate. Reporters sometimes ask about hypothetical situations. Unless you are an expert, it is usually a mistake to guess. For example, reporters often ask for speculation about a fire's cause. Only a fire investigator should touch this question. Other areas of speculation include the severity of the upcoming fire season, the potential impact of forest pests, or budget cuts. Base all answers on history, training, and experience.

Don't be misquoted. Many "misquotations" are the interviewee's fault. It is not a misquotation if you regret saying something after seeing it in print. It is not misrepresentation if you fail to explain a point clearly, thus causing the reporter to misinterpret the comments. During the interview, give short statements and wait for the reporter to stop writing before continuing. Do not overwhelm the reporter with too much detail or let the reporter form your words for you.

If the reporter says something like, "then what you mean is..." pay attention; this is a clue about how you will be quoted. If you hear a mistake in the statement that follows, correct it immediately. If a substantive mistake occurs in the story, call the reporter; if the errors continue, notify the editor. Remember, however, that if you go over a reporter's head it may hinder the relationship.

Don't belabor the point. When talking to the broadcast media, "think soundbite." No matter how long the interview, usually less than 20 seconds will be aired. In print, direct quotes typically amount to less. They will paraphrase most of your comments. Again, the best way to make a point and avoid misquotation is to be clear, simple, brief, and to the point. Highlight the most important points by saying, "The most critical issue here is..." This helps a reporter who is new to an issue.

This is a job, not a stage. It is your job to explain CAL FIRE's programs, policies, practices, and plans. Speak as a representative of CAL FIRE; do not use the news media as a personal forum. Do not make flippant remarks, no matter how comfortable you may feel with the reporter. Such statements can have a regrettable effect on the public when they are broadcast or appear in print.

Assume everything is being taped. Federal law states a taped conversation is admissible in court only if one involved party has been told that the conversation is being taped. That one party could be the reporter. State and local laws regarding taped interviews vary, so always assume the conversation is being recorded.

Assume all cameras and microphones are live. Always be careful when cameras, microphones, or reporters are nearby; never assume anything is turned off. In other words, don't do anything you wouldn't want to see on the news that night or in the paper the next morning.

The enemy is within. Reporters rarely try to trick or trap you since credibility is tied to their performance. They want to get the story right; failing to do so makes them look bad and jeopardizes future relations.

Respect the media. Information personnel should treat the media with respect and know their deadlines. When a reporter requests information not available immediately, ask what the deadline is and either meet it or call and explain. Know the law concerning the media. Most reporters know that California Penal Code 409.5 gives them access to many areas denied to the general public (see [Section 0622.6.2](#), Media Access to Crime Scenes and Disaster Areas). Treat all media representatives equally; that small town weekly should get the same information as the Los Angeles Times. Also, do not tell one news agency what another is doing.

Be prepared. Information personnel should anticipate the news media's needs. They should plan for interviews, anticipate questions, and formulate possible answers. For example, you can provide television news with visuals, newspapers with supporting facts (copy), and radio with ambient sound. Also, information personnel should be available for follow-up calls in case the reporter needs further clarification.

Be organized. Information officers should set up their files so they can retrieve commonly requested information quickly. For example, you should always be able to tell how the incident numbers compare to the 5-year average, how many acres have burned so far this year, etc. Also, information officers should know their local reporters and watch, read, and listen to their reports. Information personnel should pay special attention to any special series or reports and compliment good work.

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